

you are kinder than the cruelest thing by 10pintsofsacrifice

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Angst with a Happy Ending, Child Abuse, Gen, Hurt/Comfort, Mentions of Billy Hargrove - Freeform, Physical Abuse, heed the tags, kiiind of a vent? sort of?, that's just how it is, uh max and mike will be sarcastic best friends, wow I have not written seriously for awhile

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Relationships: Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

max has a bad night. luckily, mike is there to help.

you are kinder than the cruelest thing

Author's Note:

(you talk your shadow into starlight - if you asked the clouds for shade, the sky would split itself like [apple](#))

just a thing to help me get back into writing - also because I REALLY wanted to write mike/max friendship. it's what they deserve.

uh!! tw for: graphic descriptions of physical abuse and the aftermath, mentions of choking, and for the description of violence in general. let me know if I need to add a tag!!

other than that, enjoy!!

in all honesty, max doesn't know why she ends up on the wheelers' doorstep. the wind is howling and her fingers are starting to go numb. she feels incredibly stupid, standing there in nothing but a t-shirt and shorts; she hadn't even tried to grab a jacket.

somehow she had forgotten that the sinclairs had left for the holidays to be with family; lucas had told her an entire week in advance, just to make sure she knew. she doesn't know why her heart sunk in surprise when she saw the empty house. the bottom of her stomach felt like it had fallen out and she felt dumb, because he'd *told* her they were going to be gone. she'd still run all the way to the sinclairs' in the dark, reeling through snowbanks in her ratty old sneakers that she'd worn without socks, only to end up in an empty driveway.

mike's house isn't far from lucas'. she could have gone to will's house or she could have called steve if she was careful enough - but she ends up at mike wheeler's house. maybe it's because she can see the warm yellow lights through the thick snowfall. maybe it's because she knows she can trust mike not to treat her like glass.

i love christmas break, she thinks bitterly, rubbing her trembling hands together in an attempt to generate even a tiny bit of warmth.

this is totally fine.

the macabre necklace of reds and purples and blues pressed into her throat tells a different story. she knows that the dark, thick drying blood on her upper lip only helps to give it away.

her entire body aches and feels numb at the same time, and max tells herself that she should probably go back home because she'll freeze out here if she doesn't when it happens; the wheelers' front door creaks open. she sees a blur of navy blue before she manages to stumble out of the way and falls back on her ass in the freezing snow. max hears a low voice mumble something under their breath, and as she peers up into the light and warmth flooding from the doorway, she meets the wide-eyed and surprised gaze of mike wheeler. go figure.

for a moment they just stare at each other, too shocked to do anything more. max opens and closes her mouth in an attempt to offer an explanation but it's mike that breaks the stunned silence, eloquent as always.

"i - wh - max?"

"hey, wheeler," she breathes out shakily. "how's it going?"

even though things between them are mostly okay, if not a little awkward and uncomfortable sometimes, max still doesn't really know what to expect of mike. she sucks in her stomach and looks away, unable to look him in the eye as he speaks for fear of what he'll say. "what are you doing out here dressed like that? why are you sitting in - i mean, *shorts*?"

"oh, no reason," she hisses as the cold begins to bite through the seat of her pants. *why am i still on my ass? he probably thinks i'm really stupid or something. it's not like i don't have arms and legs.*

to be fair, her arms and legs are stiff with cold.

mike stares at her for a few long moments, eyes quickly but carefully scanning her face. she can pinpoint the exact moment his concentration breaks and he finally sees the mess of blood around her

nose and lip. "oh shit," his warm hands push into hers as he lifts her up and out of the snow. "fuck. what happened to your face?"

"don't worry about it," she mumbles. "it's fine."

but max can tell that they both know it's not fine. she can see it in the way mike's jaw sets and his pupils dilate; the way his hands curl into white-knuckled fists at his sides, the way the fear sits heavy and thick at the back of her throat as she watches him glare fiercely into the dark. *it is not fine*. it's almost the furthest from fine she could get. she knows it, he knows it, the whole *world* probably knows it.

her teeth start to chatter. she shudders so hard she can barely breathe, her core aching, her muscles protesting. she barely notices when mike drapes his hoodie around her shoulders, she's so cold.

"basement," he steps aside, ushers her in, holds the door open for her until he's sure she's inside. he shuts the door with a barely-audible click and pulls her by the hand. "my parents would *freak* if they saw you in my room."

"well, that's fair," she hums. *i'm not a telekinetic girl on the run*. "your house is so...quiet. it's nice."

he gives her a tiny smile, the kind that has something unspoken behind it, and he tugs her gently through the kitchen. staring at the clean counter tops and organized cupboards, max is struck by the fact that she hasn't really seen much of the wheeler household.

mike opens the basement door almost silently, the way that only comes from years of practice, and he flicks the light switch as he shuts the door behind them. he lets go of her hand in favour of linking his arm through hers. she's still shivering as he leads her down the stairs; her feet don't really want to cooperate, and her legs feel more than a little stiff, but mike is patient with her, pulling her back up after every stumble.

"you should probably sit down."

max blinks blearily. she nods and rubs a hand over her face with a sigh. she lets herself tip back against the old couch like a trust fall,

folding her lip between her teeth when she's nestled in the soft cushions. her body *hurts*.

her head lolls back and she hears mike suck in a sharp breath through his teeth.

"what the fuck *happened*," mike huffs softly. "what happened to your *neck*, max?"

max wants to tell him. she was going to, but then he looks at her with those wild eyes; she opens her mouth to speak and bursts into tears instead, loud ugly sobs coming from somewhere deep down in her chest. she cries so hard she coughs and she doesn't want to even *think* about what her face must look like. she pulls her knees up to her chest and just *bawls*.

she doesn't know when the couch cushion beside her dips with mike's weight. all max can process is the pain her body is in and the tears streaming down her cheeks.

until she feels an arm settle tentatively around her shoulders. until a scream suddenly threatens to crawl up the back of her throat. "it's okay, max."

it's okay. max almost laughs. "it's *not* okay. *nothing* is okay."

"well, maybe not." mike's hand gently squeezes her shoulder, soft but reassuring. he taps his foot against his ankle like he always does.

"but i can promise that you're safe here."

and max shouldn't believe him. she *can't*.

but.

a promise is something that you can't break. ever.

"friends don't lie," she whispers, tears miraculously slowing. "right?"

she watches his eyes flash with something she can't put a name to and for a moment, she feels as though she's overstepped a boundary, that she's overstayed her welcome. but then she finds the courage to meet mike's eyes again and they are alight with surprising fondness,

the smile on his face so tender max almost feels like it's not something meant for her eyes. "friends don't lie," he murmurs back.

max knows that if she'd said those words only weeks earlier, mike probably would have never spoken to her again, or would have cussed her out like he did one of his teachers that fall. now there is no tension, only warmth.

he squeezes her shoulder one more time before disentangling himself from her, moving to sit across from her so that she can see his face better. "your neck looks really bad," he says softly. "you don't have to tell me what happened, but if you wanna, i'll listen."

for some reason max finds all of her usual hesitance gone when she speaks. "billy's not scared of me anymore," she mumbles, stomach twisting uncomfortably. "i, um, don't know that he ever was scared to begin with. he told me that someone needs to put me in my place. i told him to fuck off, and he didn't like that too much. he, uh, picked me up by my throat i guess. i thought he was going to kill me. i thought he was going to *kill me*, mike. i kicked him in the stomach. he backhanded me, that's why my lip is all fucked up."

she really doesn't want to be crying any more than she has, but a tear slips down her cheek nonetheless. she swipes at it a bit too roughly, and when she pulls her fist back she notices the smudge of blood along the side of her hand. she can't stop the tear that comes after that, or the one after that and then she's crying *again* because of course she is and she's so *tired* -

mike's gentle hand pats her shoulder. "the party would never let that happen," he says, low and dark but max knows his anger is not aimed at her. "i would never let that happen - you don't deserve that, max. it's not your fault and it will *never* be your fault."

she takes a deep breath, and without a word she presses her face into his chest, and he doesn't push her away. "maybe if i'd just kept my mouth shut," she whispers shakily.

"maybe he would have left me alone."

"bullshit."

the statement is so firm and so sudden that she jumps and very nearly headbutts mike in the chin. “bull - bullshit...?”

“yeah,” he says earnestly. “people like billy are gonna do what they want regardless of what you say.”

her fingers curl into the soft and detergent-scented fabric of mike’s sweater. “i don’t know what i did wrong.”

she can feel mike stiffen but he wraps his arms around her as gently as he can. “you didn’t do anything wrong, max, and the way billy treats you isn’t because you did something wrong. billy does what he does to you because he’s piece of shit, and maybe he’s had it rough, but so have you and you’re not going out and beating people, are you? you couldn’t do *anything* to deserve what he does. you’re *miles* better than he is, max.”

“really?”

she pulls away and sits up just in time to catch mike smiling. “really, mad max. you’ve been through a lot of shit with us. you totally could’ve ditched us when shit went south but you stayed. i know for a fact that you would never hurt anyone the way billy hurts you.”

max knows that she believes him. he takes her hand and squeezes it once as he stands, patting the pillows propped against the other side of the couch. “let me clean up your face,” he says as he produces a washcloth from seemingly nowhere that he runs under the faucet in the bathroom quick. “after that, you can sleep here for the night, if you want.”

she nods sleepily and all she feels are a few quick and cool dabs before mike steps away. “that’s better. okay, now it’s time to rest.”

max can’t help but smile, even if it hurts a little bit. “thanks. see you in the morning, wheeler.”

“right back at you, mayfield.”

max rolls onto her side as mike ascends the stairs and sighs, and it feels like maybe, just maybe she might have exhaled some of the fear clinging to her heart too.

she's still smiling when the basement door closes.